Daniel Newman, Cardiff Law School

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Murder Ballads: Nick Cave and his approach to killing in song

Abstract

Violence and murder have a strong cultural currency the implications of which should be pursued by those with an interest in law and society, crime, and justice. Murder ballads are songs about death and killing with a history stretching back to the nineteenth century. Drawing out the major themes of this genre can help scholars gain a handle on how murder has been treated in popular culture, thereon providing an enhanced understanding of the human condition. As an example of such examination, 2016 marked the twentieth anniversary of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' *Murder Ballads*, their most famous and, perhaps, defining album. More than any other Bad Seeds album, *Murder Ballads* captures the essence of a band at its most comfortable in exploring the dark and taboo; violence, killing, death. In producing a whole album on murder, the band left a calling card by which the wider public could define them. This paper will explore the album by considering its key themes and, in so doing, reflect on the need to understand the use of murder in such popular music. The use of murder and death in popular music has not been properly studied yet offers potential social insight for several fields of study such as law, criminology and psychology. In particular, little considered issues around the treatment of murder in popular culture such as humour are identified, while others that require greater attention such as attitudes to women are also given due consideration.

Key Words

Popular music, murder ballads, death, law, crime

Introduction

While death and murder are notable musical topics, the dearth of research into this area means we have a lack of understanding as to why or what impact this may have on individuals and communities, institutions such as the law or principles like justice. One group that deals with such topics more than most are Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. They are an alternative rock band that formed in Melbourne in 1983 and, despite numerous line-up changes in the intervening three decades, are still making music in 2017 after 15 albums. They formed following the demise of Cave's previous band; the violently nihilistic post-punk group, the Birthday Party with their debauched songs of malevolence. The subject matter stayed much the same albeit it in an increasingly urbane and theatrical brand of rock, which led Reynolds and Press (1996: 92) to describe Cave's songwriting as "the fullest, most hideously voluptuous flowering of the abject in rock". Within this body of work, death has been called Cave's "specialist subject" (Maume, 2013). The band's most famous songs are "The Mercy Seat", as later covered by Johnny Cash, and "Red Right Hand", which would go on to soundtrack the *Scream* horror film franchise. Both songs deal with the theme that would become established as the band's brand in the first half of their career; the reality of death and, especially, gruesome murder. "The Mercy Seat" provided an unflinching, intense glimpse into the last minutes of the life of a murderer as he sat atop the electric chair awaiting his execution while "Red Right Hand" followed a serial killer who believed himself on a quest to appease a vengeful God, taking the listener through his intricate planning and preparation.

With murder and death such prominent themes in their oeuvre, it was little surprise when 1996 saw the release of a whole album explicitly dedicated to the topics – *Murder Ballads* – wherein Cave "consolidates his literary and musical agenda" (Welberry, 2009: 52). Nine albums into the band's

career, *Murder Ballads* was the Bad Seeds' most successful album to date, reaching number eight in the UK album charts, and would remain so until 2008's *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!*. It was the Bad Seeds' first album to produce a hit single launching them on the national stage in the US and UK through regular MTV play and an appearance on *Top of the Pops*. It received the band's strongest set of reviews, such as in *Rolling Stone*, which stated that "never before have manic elements elevated Cave's shtick to art as on *Murder Ballads*" (Van Parys, 1996). The album is identified as the mid-90s pinnacle of the band's career, moving Cave in particular into public consciousness as it "elevated him to the realm of archetype and institution" (Berman, 2011). Today, the album is still considered a reference point for Cave's work and, indeed, for the wider genre of murder ballads that he was drawing on (Christiansen, 2015). Cave and murder, then, have been definitively artistically linked.

The album contains new compositions as well as reworked staples from the American folk and blues traditions that developed the murder ballad as a musical style in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The idea of a murder ballad goes back to at least sixteenth century England and Scotland from whence thousands of texts containing rhymed versions of bloody crimes of the day were printed on broadside sheets, given eye-catching headlines and sold cheaply on street corners (Underwood and Parris, 2004). These grisly tales from the Old World were transplanted to America by settlers, and adapted to local circumstances to form narratives of the West and Deep South thus becoming the bedrock of contemporary American music (Tunnell, 1991).

To date, little research has questioned the enduring popularity of the murder ballad or its continuing influence in modern music. Death can be a powerful signifier in popular music (Jones and Jensen, 2005), with the (early) death of a musician able to exert a powerful effect transforming singers such as Kurt Cobain or Ian Curtis to the posthumous level of icon, albeit a commodified symbol whose image is detached from any previous humanity (Otter Bickerdike, 2014). The importance of popular music as a means to engage with death has been identified by Partridge (2015): death having been removed from the everyday lives of most Westerners despite the inevitability that all have to deal with the issues it brings up at some point in their lives. Music that confronts the listener with sudden, often brutal, death may offer a way to cope with contemporary social anxieties, especially among adolescents (Fulton and Owen, 1987). Dealing with death can also provide a valuable psychological function by helping those who come into contact with the music to come to terms with their own mortality at a time when, in the West at least until the recent rise of the terrorist threat, society has become sanitized and detached from the reality of dying (De Spelder and Strickland, 2002). It is possible that taking on themes such as murder allow performers and listeners alike to play out socially inappropriate taboos in a safe and controlled manner (Schechter, 2005).

Considering murder in song thematically points towards a fruitful avenue for research into the prevalence of such macabre themes in popular music, which might most usefully draw on the thanatourism literature in order to supplement the small amount of existing scholarship to further understanding. Thanatourism research explores the phenomenon of tourists visiting death sites; tourism that varies in the degree of darkness involved in the experience from 'dark fun factories', where murder forms light-entertainment on the one extreme, to sites of mass genocide where visitors can solemnly reflect on the other (Stone, 2006). These perspectives contrast the desire to experience the pornography of death against the need to confront the terror of death. Both draw power from the reality that death has been largely removed from the reality of mainstream lived experience so that satisfying whatever social or psychological need underpins the death instinct requires vicarious experience. Music that deals in death can be understood in such a way, with *Murder Ballads* a prime example, providing an experience through which listeners are able to visit dark themes of murder and death and, in so doing, have a variety of types that they can choose from, such as gallows humour or tragedy depending on their mood, and what they want from the experience. A range of thanatourism research has attempted to detect and categorise the motives of tourists who visit death sites, including bloodlust and the desire to celebrate crime (Dann, 1998), thrill-seeking and morbid curiosity (Dunkley et al, 2007), and empathy and self-understanding

(Ashworth, 2002). Applying such insights to popular music, we can understand that murder and death are not monolithic categories but topics that can be explored through a variety of means and consumed for a range of different motivations. Reading the narratives of murder ballads can help deepen comprehension about how such issues play out in this important cultural form.

Perhaps the success of *Murder Ballads*, at least in commercial terms, is as much a story about a particular point in Cave's career as it is about the particular subject matter of the songs. As an example the biggest hit here may have more to do with the fact that – 'Princess of Pop' –Kylie Minogue was singing on it as it was about some latent pleasure in femicide amongst a potential audience. It has been suggested, though, that chief among the the reasons for its popularity was that *Murder Ballads* "successfully tapped into the contemporary zeitgeist" and has contributed towards the cultural legacy of murder ballads (Baker, 2013*a*: 6). As such, the anniversary of this album provides an appropriate moment to reflect on its content, in particular the different ways it dealt with murder. Applying thanatourism in this treatment of *Murder Ballads* offers a means to better understand how and why artists that deal so extensively in macabre themes such as death and killing might be consumed. Beyond this, using thanatourism in this analysis may provide a prompt for future study to develop such ideas in a wider application of the thanatourism lens, which holds the potential to engage more scholars beyond musicology into exploring the area. In this case, law, criminology or psychology could all benefit from paying more attention to how these big themes around murder are treated in popular music. Boer (2012) has shown that the music of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds provides fertile ground for scholarship and it is hoped that the exploration of the band's iconic album here will make use of some of this material to stimulate broader discussions around the murder act and song. This paper will now move on to consider five themes that can be found in *Murder Ballads* if we are take on board the message from thanatourism that there is no one approach to dealing with death and murder.

The Themes of *Murder Ballads*

The songs on *Murder Ballads* have here been organized for analysis into five sections: Gallows Humour; The Power of Tragedy; Femicide; Murder as Revenge, and; Salvation. The paper considers each of these in turn. It begins by looking at the dark humour involved in many of the songs before moving on to also address the tragedy summoned in places. It will look at how the album invoked the idea of femicide and then address revenge more widely. Finally, it reflects on the possibility of salvation. The paper ends by considering the wider value of the themes explored on the album.

That laughter is the best medicine is a well-worn aphorism but there may be validity in considering this approach to dealing with murder in popular music. The *Murder Ballads* songs infused with gallows humour reflect one particular reaction to death, which might best be understood to involve psychological defence mechanisms to protect us from anxiety (Yovetich et al, 1990). In this way, turning to such songs can offer listeners a means to deal with whatever issues they have around premature death. Vaillant (1994) has categorized Freudian defence mechanisms, placing humour at the mature end of the hierarchy claiming it as a healthy response to dealing with emotional pain, a way to neutralise a difficult reality. Many defence mechanisms involve ignoring discomfort, pretending it does not exist, which is potentially dangerous for psychological well-being in the long-term. Humour deals with the issue head on albeit in a manner that diffuses its emotional potency so, for Freud (2013), humour can be regarded as the highest of these defensive processes. Indeed, McGraw and Warren (2010) have conducted research to show that humour can be utilized as a means to manage stress and discomfort with regard to troubling situations and scenarios. To be effective as a regulator of tension, the humour must be seen as a violation, which they identify as the humour transgressing social norms, involving taboo content or presenting some manner of threat. In order to be effective as a tonic, the humour must concomitantly be regarded as benign, clearly able to be perceived as safe, playful and less than serious. Studies have considered the merits of horror films and, in particular, the pleasure to be derived from humourous takes on grisly murders

using such psychoanalytic analysis (Greenberg, 2004). What is lacking is an acknowledgment that popular music can perform the same psychological function of utilising humour to help audiences deal with harsh reality in an objective manner. Reading a song such as "Stagger Lee" as a comedic text in the manner the Bad Seeds intended means it can readily satisfy such a therapeutic function for listeners. This is a song that purposefully pushes boundaries of taste and decency while always doing so in a knowing way and, as such, perfectly satisfies the McGraw and Warren (2010) test by which humourous texts that can be of psychological benefit in coping with anxiety. More research should be done to explore the way that gallows humour in popular song might help audiences deal with pain and discomfort.

The songs on *Murder Ballads* that make use of tragedy as a motif can be understood to present an attempt at mourning. For Hertz (1960: 28), rather than simply representing an individual opportunity to reflect on the death of an acquaintance, mourning is about making death the "object of a collective representation." Conventionally this occurs through communal gatherings such as funerals, wakes and commemorative services but scholars with an interest in popular music should also consider how the death of one becomes a shared experience through song such as in the national mourning channelled through Elton John's "Candle in the Wind" following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in the UK in 1997. John's single highlighted an extraordinary example of how a song could be co-opted into a sensationalist wider media discourse around death (Helmers, 2001). There remains, though, scope for understanding the role that songs not elevated to such giddy heights that they enter national consciousness may play and, on *Murder Ballads*, songs such as "The Kindness of Strangers" can also be appreciated for their potential contribution to the mourning process. Ricciardi (2003) has identified a contemporary crisis of mourning in post-modern society, whereby the past represented by mourning becomes simply a cultural product to be consumed in the cultural marketplace. As such, mourning today becomes but a spectacle that keeps death at a distance and prevents us from engaging with the subject in a meaningful way on a personal level. This is what Bersani (1990) has labelled the culture of redemption, as art has been co-opted to help society deal with the pain and despair of reality, most symbolized by its role in providing a means to mourn death. We become detached from the objects we mourn and simply enter into mechanistic processes to go through the motions. He also raises an argument as to whether such an approach to art devalues culture, by relegating it to a purely rational, practical form that is simply to be used as an emotional repair kit. This debate over the contemporary role of mourning in culture rages on in philosophical circles (Lerner, 2007). As such analyses have tended to explore art and culture such as literature or film, further enquiry into the role that popular music might play in such a process would also be of value, and further unpicking the songs that deal with murder in such a tragic way as occurs on *Murder Ballads* can contribute towards developing knowledge in this area.

The femicide to be found in *Murder Ballads* clearly raises wider questions about attitudes of violence to women in society. Songs such as "Where the Wild Roses Grow" play into wider social trends of victim-blaming that increasingly pervade popular understandings of crimes against women, especially when violence involves a sexual element (Durham, 2013). Indeed, Summers and Feldman (1984) have conducted research to show that female victims are disproportionately blamed for inter-spousal violence. With particular regard to murder, victim-blaming has been at the heart of the controversial provocation defence presented across common law countries, characterized by a consideration that angry retaliatory responses speak of human frailty and should be understood in certain situations (Horder, 2005). Most pertinently, Horder and Fitz-Gibbon (2015) show that such provocation is inherently sexist for the manner that it has tended to offer protection to jealous men who attack their female partners, one that has gained much sympathy from the judiciary. The argument runs that, in a jurisdiction such as England and Wales, men who lash out in a sudden outburst of rage on discovering a wife's infidelity have been protected, while women who have been victims of domestic abuse for some time and finally decide to react to their husbands have been ignored. Traditional murder ballads such as "Shotgun Blues" are infused with the same attitude

and, while *Murder Ballads* does not engage with such material to as great a degree as it might, the conventional murdered sweetheart pattern that is followed does act to present some manner of victim-blaming. In "Where the Wild Roses Grow", Elisa's beauty and purity is her downfall as the narrator uses it to justify murdering her. With a culture of misogyny still pervading contemporary popular music genres such as hip hop, there is a need for more research to study the impact of such victim-blaming narratives in songs about femicide to, both, help understand such regressive attitudes to female victims and, thereon, to help transform them into something more enlightened (Keathley, 2002). This is a social problem, and one which a greater appreciation of murder ballads and their cultural inheritance could assist with. There are exemplary studies looking at the role of gender in popular music from a variety of angles (Whiteley, 2007), as such there seems ample opportunity to developed a perspective that looks at femicide.

Building on the motivations of jealousy inherent in femicide, much art and literature has been devoted to the quest of exploring the motivations of killers (Lenz, 2003). Popular culture, in particular, has been occupied with depicting criminal practices (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995). Indeed, Burney (2012) highlights that criminologists could learn a great deal from considering cultural forms as there has so often been overlap in the twin goals to understand the criminal mind and gain meaning from the criminal act. As epitomized by the murder ballad genre, it should be appreciated that popular song has made a concerted effort to engage in similar themes, though this has been little appreciated by scholars to date and represents an area in need of more research (Hamerlinck, 1999). For Klein (1988), there is a death instinct in us all that can lead to destructive behaviours, motivated in no small part by feelings of jealousy and envy. Revenge can thus be identified as a key motivation in many murders (Fox and Levin, 2015), with *Murder Ballads* songs such as "Henry Lee" providing a lens through which to gain a handle on the feelings and thoughts that can be involved. The narratives of killers that typify the murder ballad genre, then, offer an extensive resource for those with an interest in looking to uncover how murderers work and what drives them, while audience studies could also help to gain an appreciation into how their explanations are understood by wider society. The popular music scholar has the opportunity to fully examine such songs of revenge and thus push forward understanding, not least through developing cross-disciplinary research with criminologists.

Debates around faith and the belief in an afterlife show two different means of working through issues around death as reflected in discussions on the meaning behind "Death is Not the End" on *Murder Ballads*. Fear of death has been shown to vary according to levels of religious commitment (Florian and Kravetz, 1983). Religions are acutely tied in with considerations of the human condition and, at the most basic level, function as guides for how individuals should deal with the ups and down that accompany that condition (Pargament, 1997). It is a central preoccupation of religion to provide answers to the question of what happens after death and help believers cope with the prospect of death. Indeed, in anthropological terms, Geertz (1966: 19) has identified that a key element of religion lies in how it makes loss and resultant feelings of pain "something bearable, supportable – something, as we say, sufferable." Indeed, the sentiment at the heart of the Christianity under consideration in "Death is Not the End" could be understood as: don't mourn for the cocoon, for the butterfly has flown. Death, then, represents a period of sorrow but, at the same time, is an opportunity to rejoice that the individual's soul has entered heaven to be with Christ. There is uncertainty and more variation over how atheists deal with death (Karrel, 2015). Some will focus on celebrating the life while others will take relief that there is no need to worry about the judgment that accompanies religious conceptions of the afterlife, but the suggestion is that atheists will deal with it differently (Feldman, 1991). Religion has been show to play an important role in the coping process, giving those with faith an advantage (Park and Cohen, 1993). Rey (2005), though, suggests that atheists and the religious are not necessarily to be considered as presenting two completely varying approaches to issues such as death and mourning, highlighting that even believers have doubts while those who do not have faith may still find solace in the trappings of

religion especially when it comes to issues such as death. Understanding the comparisons and contrasts between those with and without faith may be supported by exploring how different groups relate to songs that deal with death, most obviously hymns but also popular music with religious overtones such as *Murder Ballads'* example of Dylan's born again phase.

The remainder of this paper will probe these themes by examining the ten songs that make up *Murder Ballads*. The first theme to be explored is, perhaps, the most important for understanding the album, giving regard to the excessive, almost absurdist nature of the album – an album "so extreme as to be almost parodic, something Cave seems to acknowledge with the frequent moments of black comedy that pepper the record" (Baker, 2013*b*: 231).

Gallows Humour

Perhaps the most often forgotten trait of Cave and his music is the sense of humour that pervades much of his output, from the grotesque absurdity of the Birthday Party to the unreconstructed grunt of Grinderman. This humour is also present in the work of the Bad Seeds and forms a foundational stone of *Murder Ballads* (Baker, 2013*b*). Fundamentally, *Murder Ballads* is underpinned by a sense of dark humour, evident in its very premise, as Cave states:

> It actually started as a joke…. The idea of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds dedicating an entire album to murder appealed to us in some way (Sclavunos, 2015).

What Cave was doing with *Murder Ballads* was taking the well-known fact that the Bad Seeds deal in such dark subject matters as death and violence to its extreme, which he understood to be inherently ludicrous. In this spirit, the gruesome nature of killing in song was considered a rich vein of humour to mine:

> I think the reason it is funny is because it is gruesome. It is so relentlessly gruesome that it can't be taken seriously. But there is a very broad, open kind of humour in it as well. It's not all black comedy. Some things are just funny in anyone's language (Dwyer, 1995).

For the Bad Seeds, *Murder Ballads* has "always been loosely referred to in the band as a 'comedy' record" and they acknowledge that "some tracks positively radiate an inappropriately joyful mood" (Sclavunos, 2015). At the heart of *Murder Ballads*, is a collection of particularly over-the-top, gory and gruesome songs filled with a spirit of knowingly ridiculous fun, namely "Stagger Lee", "The Curse of Millhaven" and "O'Malley's Bar". Such songs are suffused with what Rose (2013: 106) has referred to as "low, if ghoulish, comedy".

"Stagger Lee" is based on a traditional American folk song from the late nineteenth century recounting a bar room fight between two local gangsters after one (William 'Billy' Lyons) stole the hat of the other (Lee 'Stag' Shelton) during an argument. There are dozens of versions, most notably by Lloyd Price, which tell the story in a more or less authentic manner; however, the Bad Seeds' version takes liberties with a wilder tale being spun. The band came across an anthology of toasts (a type of proto-rap); poems that convicts recite to one another in jail for entertainment and this book contained a particularly lurid version of "Stagger Lee" offered by a "black hustler", or pimp (Wepman et al, 1986: 134). Atop of a funky bass line that means the song carries a genuine swagger, the product of a single take jam session between the band, Cave's obscene and supercilious lyrics makes "Stagger Lee" sound impossibly cool, introducing himself as "that bad motherfucker called Stagger Lee". Stag turns up to a bar, shoots the bar keeper dead for badmouthing him and, in so doing, attracts the attentions of the most desirable local prostitute who offers to take him back to her room for free. The only catch is that Stag must be gone before her boyfriend Billy arrives, a warning that makes Stag want to be caught so he can show off in the ensuing confrontation. As Stag states:

> I'll stay here 'till Billy comes in, 'till time comes to pass

> And furthermore I'll fuck Billy in his motherfucking ass
>
> I'm a bad motherfucker, don't you know
>
> And I'll crawl over fifty good pussies just to get one fat boy's asshole

Billy duly catches them in the act, realises that this is the infamous Stag and tells him to get off his girlfriend, but Stag simply retorts:

> Yeah, I'm Stagger Lee and you better get down on your knees
>
> And suck my dick, because If you don't you're gonna be dead

Billy obliges and Stag "filled him full of lead", a double entendre suggesting that he both had sex with and killed him. Despite, or rather because of, the appalling behaviour of Stag, the song seems designed to put a smile on the listener's face, and variously gasp and smirk at his outrageous antics and the manner in which they (no pun intended) build to a head.

The next song in this vein is "The Curse of Millhaven", where Cave voices a 15 year old serial killer named Loretta as she excitedly recounts the way she has terrorized a small town over the most cheerful bouncing rhythm section and glorious swirling organ. Loretta currently resides in a mental institution and is delighting in admitting to the crimes that have been committed, getting carried away with telling all the gory detail of her escapades as she declares that "I'll sing to the lot, now you got me going". In each verse, she describes a different crime, which get ever more extreme, going from bashing a boy's head in with a rock, to crucifying a dog and, finally, laying waste to a whole bus full of school children who she buried under her house. Throughout there is a repeated refrain offering a variation on "all God's children they all gotta die", which is recited with much gusto as if it were the most inspirational of messages. As the song goes on, Loretta gradually reveals her insanity and, by the end, she is frothing at the mouth. She finally reflects on whether she regrets anything:

> They ask me if I feel remorse and I answer, "Why of course!"
>
> There is so much more I could have done if they'd let me!

As with "Stagger Lee", the horrible hit list of crimes Loretta has regaled us with is performed with such a sense of gaudy flamboyance that there can be no doubt that the listener is supposed to be gaining perverse pleasure at the horror on display rather than feeling sad or dismayed.

The third example of this gallows humour lies in the epic slaughter-fest that is the 14 minute, 38 verse long "O'Malley's Bar", wherein the amount of murder that can be contained in one song is pushed beyond any sensible limits that might be imagined. A body count of 12 victims piles up, in gleeful and remorseless abandon over a purposively ridiculous lounge-jazz backing. The narrator fuses sexual satisfaction ("my dick felt long and hard") with spiritual self-confidence ("I am the man for which no God waits") as he kills one after another in the bar. Cave describes the less than serious inspiration found in his irritation with having to spend time with happy tourists:

> I woke up one morning hungover at the hotel swimming pool in Germany somewhere. There was a party going on – a bunch of German holidaymakers doing whatever those sorts of people do, but doing it very noisily. I didn't really have the energy to be able to get off the banana lounge and find my room, so instead I wrote a song and gave the holidaymakers names and described them and, well, executed them on the page…. It became a shaggy dog story, a blood-soaked shaggy dog story (Sclavunos, 2015).

On considering the work that resulted, Cave said, "we couldn't use O'Malley's Bar on any of our other records so we had to make a record, an environment where the song could exist" (Walker, 1995). The sheer extent of the violence and killing in "O'Malley's Bar" is so extreme that it could only conceivably be housed on a record that the band thought to be comedic, the deranged nature of the

song requiring that it be taken with a knowing sense of black comedy. Cave and the Bad Seeds are almost playing up to the accusations of (particularly) misogyny and violence that had been raised earlier in their career. In this sense the excess of the album and songs like “O’Malley’s Bar” seems as significant as the acts that are being described. It is the excess and inventiveness of murder that sometimes pushes the album into the realms of ironic self-parody. Throughout “O’Malley’s Bar” as with “Stagger Lee” and “The Curse of Millhaven”, it is readily apparent that the band are having fun as befits a session whence the Bad Seeds supposedly invited their friends to sit in, making noise together and generally “having a laugh”(Sclavunos, 2015).

The Power of Tragedy

Despite the dark humour that underpins so much of the album, there are moments of heart-wrenching bleakness that serve as a stark contrast to the fun and frivolity of romps such as “Stagger Lee”. There are songs that can only be properly described as “intense”, “visceral” and “rancid”; “the stuff of Gothic nightmares” (Groom, 2013: 87). One such track actually opens the album, the deceptively named, “Song of Joy”. The song is a penetratingly grim trawl through the detail of how a woman and her three children were slaughtered in their home. In no way can this song be considered to display any gallows humour. For a new listener coming to the album aware of Cave’s overall desire to present murder in a knowingly macabre fashion, the brutal piano dirge that opens it will likely have a jarring effect. “Song of Joy” must rank as one of Cave’s bleakest and most chilling tracks though its meaning is not immediately apparent.

We begin by meeting a wandering vagabond, keen to unburden himself and tell us about his family:

> Have mercy on me, sir
>
> Allow me to impose on you
>
> I have no place to stay
>
> And my bones are cold right through
>
> I will tell you a story
>
> Of a man and his family
>
> And I swear that it is true

The story recounts the troubles they have gone through; his wife, Joy, and their three children, Hilda, Hattie and Holly. The narrator met Joy a decade before when she was happy and lived up to her name but, as their married life progressed, she became sadder and filled with sorrow. We are told that it was as if Joy had a premonition that she would soon come to a bloody end and she became withdrawn and morose. Even when the couple had their children, “there was no laughter in the house” as mother and daughters were all gripped by a deep melancholy. Then one night, the narrator went out to visit a sick friend. That night we are told saw Joy gagged and bound with electrical tape then stabbed repeatedly before being stuffed into a sleeping bag. The three daughters met the same fate.

The narrator explains that he arrived home later that night and called the police to tell them how his family had been murdered. We are told that the police never caught the man and he has since gone on to murder many more as he travels around the country. The murderer’s trademark is to daub the walls with the line, “his red right hand”. The narrator notes that he has been informed that this line comes from *Paradise Lost* by Milton. It is at this point in the song that we can deduce that some things are not as they may first seem because the narrator, who claims not to know Milton, has been including references from Milton’s work in his story, quotes such as “farewell, happy fields” and “hail horrors hail”, which are also lifted from *Paradise Lost*. It is then that we may come to reflect on how

the narrator's claim to have been visiting a sick friend on the night of the murder was once a euphemism used by men who would be going out and getting into trouble while they left their wives at home. Finally, when the narrator reveals that he has been wandering around and needs a place to stay we are left to deduce that he could be the killer; it was likely him that murdered his family. We might be next. This point of realisation is unsettling. Rather than feeling sympathy for the narrator's plight, we now feel sickened by the pleasure he seemed to derive from boasting about his conquests and terror that we are likely next on his list.

Another tragic song is "The Kindness of Strangers", a tale that would be sad enough on its own without including actual crying from Anita Lane that gets more intense as the story progresses. This is one of the gloomiest songs on the album, almost deliberately so as if Cave were intending to write a song as sad as could possibly be without any hint of redemption and certainly no opportunity to smile at anything that has happened to the protagonist, Mary Bellows (always introduced solemnly as "poor Mary Bellows"). At the very beginning, we are told of how Mary ultimately meets her fate:

> They found Mary Bellows cuffed to the bed
>
> With a rag in her mouth and a bullet in her head

We then go on to learn more about how Mary grew up penniless and hungry in Arkansas from whence she dreamed of one day escaping from her grinding poverty to catch a glimpse of the sea, which became the symbol of her ambition.

Mary set out across the country by train in an effort to get to the coast. Along the way, she meets an apparently kindly stranger, Richard Slade, who offers to carry her bags as she settles into a hotel on the sea front. Slade makes a pass at Mary but she refuses, "I'm a good girl, sir…. I couldn't possibly permit you in". He leaves without a word while she sits on her hotel bed, listening to the sea breeze but, suddenly feeling alone and homesick, she opens the latch on the door seemingly to let Slade know that he would now be welcome in if he were to pass by again. The next thing we know, Mary has been murdered in her hotel room right at the moment when she might finally experience some happiness. Cave has described the song as:

> Simply an exercise in cruelty, sitting down and writing a character and making her so naive and virtuous, and then wiping her out. I can't define this, but there is a certain satisfaction in doing that (Maume, 2013).

The blunt reality of this song is that a poor innocent such as Mary has been killed for no apparent rhyme or reason, her death in this song is not accompanied by any moral beyond the miserable conclusion that we cannot rely on the kindness of strangers, a misanthropic message of absolute dejection that seems to think forward to future Bad Seeds tracks such as "People Ain't No Good". As listeners, we are left impotent; there is simply nothing to be done apart from the unpalatable prospect of retreating from the world.

Perhaps the awkward juxtaposition between the more bombastic and absurd fare such as "O'Malley's Bar" – the "party record" that *Murder Ballads* was supposed to represent – and the delicately tragic songs detailed here reflect Cave's stated objective, "to make a record that would piss people off"(Sclavunos, 2015).The tonal shift between these two types of song makes for an uncomfortable listen at times and will disorientate some listeners, confusing them about what emotions they should feel to the murder ballads at various points of the album. For a record that should be about pantomime, these are tear-jerking moments of guttural pain and sadness. The contrast provided by "Song of Joy" and "The Kindness of Strangers" highlights the power of murder as a story device, especially when considering a single victim or a handful of victims who have done nothing to upset or wrong anybody. It can be used as a catalyst for a good time as in "The Curse of Millhaven" with its crazed litany of dupes. However, a more restrained treatment of murder can be deployed to bring us to our knees if all we are presented is thoughtless violence and tragic loss.

Femicide

One of the most common themes in murder ballads is femicide, the killing of women as a form of hate crime (Tunnell, 1995). Within the murder ballad canon, there are two main tropes that characterise paeans to femicide: provocation and the love-death. It is, of course, men who have written and performed the majority of murder ballads and, in both the provocation and love-death approach, women can be seen to have been fetishized either appearing as treacherous, base prostitutes to be disdained or virtuous, Madonnas whose beauty drives the narrator to the point of madness. Either way, women are objectified and are variously to be used and disposed of, or coveted and preserved. On *Murder Ballads*, Cave eschews the first approach of exploring femicide though provocation but offers two songs that follow after one another ("Lovely Creature" and "Where the Wild Roses Grow") that slot neatly into the love-death category.

Songs of provocation are numerous among murder ballads and many of the most famous tales explore this theme, as evidenced by blues standards from the first half of the twentieth century such as "You was Born to Die" by Blind Willie McTell or "Shotgun Blues" by Lightnin' Hopkins. The former sees the narrator sneeringly threaten a woman for seeing other men with the strong implication that it will be him who sees her destiny is fulfilled unless she professes her devotion to him. In the latter, the narrator is complaining that his partner has left him to which his only response is to call for his shotgun so he can go and confront her. One of the most notorious of these blues murder ballads must be "I'm Going to Murder my Baby" by Pat Hare, where the narrator claims that he is going to kill his girlfriend as she has been unfaithful, which actually happened eight years later and saw Hare die in prison. In all the provocation songs, we see women cast as responsible for actions of the male narrator; the man is driven to kill her and thus absolved of responsibility. What we see is an example of victim-blaming that claims the women's lack of sublimation to the man provides an excuse for her murder. The Bad Seeds had previously explored this genre, such as in their cover of John Lee Hooker's "I'm Going to Kill that Woman" but, while women are killed on *Murder Ballads*, their stories cannot be said to be fall into this group of songs.

The love-death approach typifies Cave's treatment of women in *Murder Ballads*, using the feminine virtue stereotype as he "returns to set characters such as the poor innocent girl who blindly walks into her own demise or the maiden cut short of discovering sexual pleasure when she pays for her curiosity with her life" (Fernandez, 2012). The narrator is struck by the innocence and beauty of the women, he idolises her and strikes out to murder her because he either cannot handle how perfect she is, is jealous that other men might get to bask in her glow, because he wants to preserve her in some perfect moment or due to having debased her through intercourse thus sullying what she had previously represented to the man. For Cohen (1997: 277), the "beautiful female murder victim" is an established theme that runs through traditional folk stories and feeds directly into the murder ballads. It has been remarked that "murdering a sweetheart, rather than marrying her, is the basis of so many American ballads that foreigners must wonder whether this is our national pastime" (Cohen, 2005: 116). The drama and sensation surrounding the death of a woman, especially one writ through with innocence, is a well-honed cultural trope (Bronfen, 1992). Murder ballads such as "Lovely Creature" and "Where the Wild Roses Grow" act to epitomise the long-held belief that the death of a beautiful woman "is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe, 1846: 163). Cave has a similar opinion:

> I've always enjoyed writing songs about dead women. It's something that crops up that still hold some mystery, even to me (The Stud Brothers, 1986).

Cave, then, fits neatly into the femicide tradition of the murder ballads.

In "Lovely Creature", we are talked through the narrator first placing eyes on the woman, asking her to accompany him for a walk and then being filled with joy as she agrees. They walk through the night but only one of them ever returns:

When I got home, my lovely creature

She was no longer with me

While we are not told what happened, it is clear that the narrator killed her while they walked over the hills and mountains. The only clue to the motive lies in his continued characterisation of the woman as a "lovely creature" and the way that the song finishes as it starts, with an evocation of how she was to be seen:

With her hair full of ribbons

And green gloves on her hands

He left her as he found her, the vision of her perfection kept for eternity in his memory as if in aspic.

A similar fate befalls the female protagonist, Elisa Day, in the next song on the album, "Where the Wild Roses Grow". Rather than restrict us to the account of the male murderer, "Where the Wild Roses Grow" is a duet that offers insight into the thoughts of Elisa and the man who ultimately cracks her head open with a rock. The song, an update of the traditional "Banks of the Roses", sees Elisa tell the story of being charmed and seduced with what "would be my first man", while Cave's story is one of his wrestling with how to deal with her intense beauty. Cave calls Elisa "the Wild Rose" and eventually takes her to the riverside where the wild roses grows, gets her to lie down, makes love to her and, kneeling above her with the rock, whispers that "all beauty must die" as he lays her to rest amongst nature's other beauty. The female vocal is provided by Kylie Minogue, an artist Cave had long admired with the song written for her, to play on the idea of debasing her clean-cut 'Pop Princess' image:

> This song, even though it's a murder ballad, is dealing with a kind of obsession I had with her – on a professional level, but an obsession – which is about her beauty and her innocence (Dwyer, 1995).

Here Cave weaves the love-death theme in traditional murder ballads with the projections of purity and perfection generated in the media for a modern 'girl next-door' pop star, a theme he would later return to in his book, *The Death of Bunny Monro*.

While these two songs are not explicitly giving the women responsibility for their own demises as in the provocation songs, the love-death songs are still to be understood as misogynistic for the manner in which they rationalise the killing based on how the women's purity and magnificence made the man feel. Cave has reflected on this when responding to criticism of his portrayal of women:

> I'm not a misogynist…. I get criticized for a lot of what I write about, but as far as I'm concerned I'm actually standing up and having a look at what goes on in the minds of men, and I have the authority to talk about it because I'm a man. Women don't have the authority because they don't know what goes on in a man's head, so largely what they say is kind of irrelevant. My songs and stories and books are character-driven, they talk about the way people are and the way men are and women are (Goodman, 2010).

Even by this defence, though, the women in such songs are merely devices through which to explore men's psychology, simply a means to an end. Both songs are among those on the album where Cave takes the voice of the murderer; as Groom (2013: 92) notes, "narrowing the distance between subject and singer" such a first person narrative taking us further into the murder act via the murderer. In this pair of songs, we are invited to take on the role of the woman-killer, which has the impact of drawing us into the value-system that justifies it. In this manner, "Lovely Creature" and "Where the Wild Roses Grow" reflect the sexist trend inherent in the murder ballad oeuvre and do so without critique. In this respect, *Murder Ballads* is simply playing to type and can be accused of

reflecting the dominant values of the historical genre when a more enlightened and intelligent figure such as Cave had the potential to subvert them (Fernandez, 2012). Cave should, not, though be dismissed as failing to write strong women into the *Murder Ballads* album as reflected in songs such as “The Curse of Millhaven” and “Henry Lee”.

Murder as Revenge

Alongside femicide, murder as revenge could be seen as the other major theme to emerge from the murder ballad tradition (Broude, 1975). Such ballads involve an individual who considers themselves to have been wronged and who goes on to exact retribution by punishing those who were deemed to have wronged them. There is an obvious overlap with the provocation strand of femicide, which are at root songs about the rageful reactions of men spurned or betrayed. While the Bad Seeds did not offer a song in the provocation tradition of femicide, they did provide songs of revenge, including “Henry Lee”, which can be seen to show similar motivations to the provocation strand only transplanted onto a female killer. Cave has a fascination with such songs as reflected by his belief that true love songs are also hate songs and involve pain revealed in his 1998 lecture to the Vienna Poetry Academy, *The Secret Life of the Love Song*:

> The writer who refuses to explore the darker regions of the heart will never be able to write convincingly about the wonder, the magic and the joy of love for just as goodness cannot be trusted unless it has breathed the same air as evil – the enduring metaphor of Christ crucified between two criminals comes to mind here – so within the fabric of the love song, within its melody, its lyric, one must sense an acknowledgement of its capacity for suffering.

Seeking revenge is the way those hurt in love so often react to the pain. The reaction of the scorned female in “Henry Lee”, then, shows the role such pain can play in love, and the need she felt to hit out and hurt him psychically as she had been hurt emotionally.

“Henry Lee” is based on the eighteenth century Scottish folk song,” Young Hunting” with a theme of betrayal at its heart. In contrast to femicide, this is a song where the man is unfaithful and the woman is the one who exacts her revenge. The song is a duet with PJ Harvey, with whom Cave would soon enter into a relationship, which she selected after initially turning down “The Curse of Millhaven” that Cave had written for her. The pair takes it in turns to sing verses; reversing the roles in “Where the Wild Roses Grow” as the female guest this time murders Cave. The song begins with Harvey imploring Lee to spend the night with her as “you won't find a girl in this damn world that will compare with me”. Lee responds that he will not stay the night because he has another woman, whom he claims to “love far better than thee”. Harvey leans against a fence as if to invite Lee for a kiss but, when he leans in, she bludgeons him to death with a pen-knife that she had concealed. She drags his body to a deep well and throws it down over a hundred feet before taunting Lee’s other love:

> Lie there, lie there, little Henry Lee
>
> ‘Till the flesh drops from your bones
>
> For the girl you have in that merry green land
>
> Can wait forever for you to come home

In “Henry Lee” we see the scorned lover get her revenge. “Henry Lee” is one of the small number of notable murder ballads where it is the woman who gives the man who sleeps with other people his just desserts and, in this regard, is probably the most notable alongside “Frankie and Johnny” wherein the cheating male is shot dead by the female protagonist. There remains, though, a strong imbalance in favour of songs that have men killing women for supposed transgressions throughout the tradition.

“Crow Jane” offers a second song of revenge but, this time, rather than getting one over an unfaithful partner, the title character is reacting to a more serious wrong. When we meet Crow Jane, we are immediately told that she has “horrors in her head that her tongue dare not name”. She lives a life of pain and, though we are not told what has hurt her so much, it becomes apparent that 20 workers from the nearby mine gang-raped her as she lay in her little shack (they “poured their pistols dry”). As the song progresses, Crow Jane comes to face up to what happened to her and sets off to buy a gun before heading in to the town where the miners lived:

> I asked that girl which road she was taking
>
> Said she was walking the road of hate
>
> But she stopped on a coal-trolley up to New Haven
>
> Population: 48

In the last verse, Crow Jane returns home with her guns still smoking:

> Laughing all the way back from the new town
>
> Population, now, 28

Crow Jane got her revenge by killing those who had raped her.

For Groom (2013: 83), the murder ballads that influenced cave often focused on ‘maverick heroes’ and ‘loveable rogues’; as it in the tradition of the genre, criminals are celebrated not simply for rebellion against the powerful but for their willingness to exact ruthless and bloody vengeance on those who wronged them. Cave is interested in revenge and the manner that it can be used as a moral justification for murder. The theme of revenge is one that has occupied Cave and which he has developed beyond his songs, and into his novel, *And The Ass Saw The Angel*, as in his film, *The Proposition*. The major theme of both these works is vengeance. In the novel, Euchrid Eucrow, a poor mute with abusive parents in America’s Deep South, goes through a process of mental breakdown and begins to get angelic visions. He is hated by the God-fearing town that react by making his life one of pain. Eucrow goes on to exact bloody vengeance on his tormentors and the reader is placed firmly on his side. In the film, the violent rape and murder of the Hopkins family by the Burns Brothers in the Australian outback of the 1800s leads to a cascade of ever escalating violence in the name of vengeance. There is a great deal of moral ambiguity in the film but the plot focuses around the idea of exacting justice from murder as a means of retribution. Revenge is an interest of Cave and it seems the idea of natural justice inherent in the murder ballad tradition was one of the appeals of this genre to him.

Salvation

The final track on the album, a cover of Bob Dylan’s “Death is Not the End”, moves us definitively beyond the murder act and forward to one last reflection about the consequences of killing. This is not a murder ballad at all, it is a musing on what happens next and, as such, the manner in which this track stands out from the rest suggests Cave intended to convey some kind of message with it. Perhaps he sought to question whether or not death matters. The song focuses our minds on the notion of salvation and whether this can be seen to follow death. What we have is the prospect that all the nastiness that has gone before might actually not matter, if there is something more – something better – to look forward to after death. The Bad Seeds version of this song can be read in two quite different ways: as an optimistic hymn to life beyond death or as a sinister warning that suffering can last beyond death. The listener will hear what they want to hear depending on what they want this Bad Seeds album to do; present genuine gothic despair or provide a knowing play through some thrillingly dark subject matter. Important to reaching any conclusion on the meaning

of this song, and the overall *Murder Ballads* view on death, will require us to take into account Cave's complex relationship with Christianity.

"Death is Not the End" has the laid back, informal feel of a sing-along from one of Johnny Cash's 1970s television shows, where he and the Carter Family would perform with special guests and which heavily influenced Cave as a child. Alongside Cave, it features vocals from the album's other vocalists (PJ Harvey, Kylie Minogue), long-term musician friends of Cave (Anita Lane, Shane MacGowan) and other members of the Bad Seeds (Thomas Wylder, Blixa Bargeld). Each vocalist takes a couplet describing some of the difficult moments that we can face through our lives, times when we are sad, lonely and without a friend, or when our dreams are crumbling around us and we have no idea of what is coming next. In particular, these scenarios talk about times of confusion and anxiety when we need advice and support. After each couplet, combinations of the singers join to share the repeated refrain to "remember that death is not the end". The middle eight breaks from this pattern, splitting female and male singers into two small choirs to impart the message of faith at the heart of the song that, "the bright light of salvation shines in dark and empty skies".

On first listening, "Death is Not the End" seems an unambiguously Christian missive on salvation and this is certainly how it was intended when originally written by Dylan after his becoming a born-again Christian. Dylan's message was clear; if we accept God into our lives, we will never be alone, in this life or the next. Despite his public image as a hedonistic rebel and his artistic focus on cruelty, Cave has always had Christian faith, albeit of a most idiosyncratic variety (Alderton, 2011). Cave explored his relationship to faith in a 1996 lecture delivered to the BBC Radio 3 Religious Services Department, *The Flesh Made Word*. Here Cave describes being brought up within the Anglican Church, though he felt detached from their notion of a distant and remote God, and left uninspired by what he saw to be bland and misinformed dogma. Later at Art College, he rediscovered the Old Testament and was fascinated by the idea of a brutal and merciless God, a despotic God that makes a pitiful, broken humanity suffer under His dominion. The literary quality of this cruel relationship between God and His people appealed to Cave's artistic sensibilities, especially due to the personal problems he was having at the time. Such themes of horror and despair began to infuse his writing and, indeed, can be seen to characterise his work with the Birthday Party where the world was a nasty, tough place to be.

Cave's view of God is that He was written into being by humanity through a creative process and, as such, could be rendered obsolete through being ignored again. God exists only to inspire. Cave does believe in Christ, though he sees Christ as simply an intensely spiritual man who represents the physical embodiment of God and who, through his teachings, can help others reach their maximum potential. Such views clearly place Cave at odds with the established Church, institutions that he rejects as too formalistic and knowingly operates his own faith from outside mainstream Christianity. With regards to "Death is Not the End", the most important factor to consider here is that Cave remains essentially unsure about how his views on Christ and God play into the idea of afterlife:

> I have a general feeling that there's some kind of divinity in the world, something I really can't put my finger on, but something that prevents me from saying that you just die and it's all over and prevents me from saying that uncategorically there's no such thing as any higher level of spirituality or whatever (Dwyer, 1995).

He is, though, fairly sure that whatever else there may be it is not that afterlife conceived of in doctrinal Christianity, "I feel there is something like that, but at the same time, I don't believe in heaven and hell…. I certainly hope that I'm right in that respect" (Dwyer, 1995). While Cave reflects with humour on how his own life would likely place him in hell rather than heaven, the deeper point he is making is that he simply cannot be certain what comes next and that the extent of the faith he does hold will not answer such questions in his mind.

“Death is Not the End” could be generously taken as providing a welcome happy ending to a hard-going, merciless album full of horror and hopelessness. Cave may not have certainty that there is an afterlife but the potential that there may be offers some solace to lift the gloom pervading the endless songs of murder. With Cave wanting this album to be taken in a spirit of gallows humour, perhaps a final chink of light has been provided to ensure that we are not left morose and in a state of depression that was not at all intended in the making of the album. Whatever spiritual beliefs Cave holds may have compelled him to leave on a hopeful note. Conversely, it may be that Cave found Dylan’s message of faith providing an escape from pain and suffering unpalatable in that the flip-side of the explicitly positive message for believers is that non-believers will be cursed to eternal damnation, and a continuation of the pain and suffering experienced on Earth. As such, he is throwing the song in there as one final cruel joke, along that lines that, if we thought the nastiness and cruelty played out in the forgoing songs would all be relieved in the afterlife, we were wrong: most of us will be receiving a whole lot more of it in hell for either not believing or leading sinful lives. The song, then, represents one final sucker punch as the band run away laughing. It may even be that “Death is Not the End” uses this idea of salvation to return us to the self-parody of the band’s gallows humour. The the all-star cast – perhaps akin to a charity record such as Band Aid – and the somewhat ramshackle nature of the recording could render this song the ultimate moment of black humour after the body count preceding it.

Is there salvation for us after death and can we rest assured that all the characters that came to such bloody downfalls over the course of this album were saved? It is ultimately up to us to decide what we take away from this song and, thereon, the significance we place on the 63 lives that were lost during the course of the album’s stories. Whether we take the cheerful or the cynical approach, the song provides an effective conclusion to the album and, in so doing, offers an end point to this phase of Cave’s career as he himself reflected:

> It's very much a kind of full stop, this record, a sort of cleaning of the house. Unless I regress terribly over the next couple of years it's definitely that last thing of this nature that I'll do. I feel very much that I want to move on from a lot of these themes (Dwyer, 1995).

What followed on the next album, *The Boatman’s Call*, was a move away from character-driven songs full of carnivalesque horror that allowed Cave to explore the wildest fancies of his imagination, rather offering a more thoughtful and introspective consideration of meditations on personal issues. The ambiguity with which “Death is Not the End” brings down the murder ballad phase of the Bad Seeds’ oeuvre left a fitting sense of mystery as to just how much they bought into the darker elements of their music and just how listeners should react to it.

Conclusion

This paper has considered *Murder Ballads* in terms of themes rather than songs, looking at the manner in which groups of songs can be identified to deal with murder and death in different ways. In so doing, it important lessons from thanatourism research to look at the use of killing in popular music. *Murder Ballads* does not stand alone and its subject matter is a well-established and deeply entrenched one within popular music (Thomson, 2008). Popular culture and, especially songs, offer a ready means through which to tackle the issue of death but yet one that has to date been grossly underappreciated for its socio-psychological role (Thursh and Faulus, 1979). *Murder Ballads* is but one example of murder and death in popular music and, while the album is interesting in and of itself, there is a gap in the literature for study that seeks a more sophisticated comprehension of why these themes endure. What we can take from the album is that there is no simple, single treatment of murder in song but, rather, a variety of approaches can be adopted. It will be interesting next to expand this insight out onto the wider body of murder ballads and songs about death.

The five themes identified on *Murder Ballads* are simply the tip of the iceberg but the anniversary of this album offers a useful reminder of the wider value that greater engagement with the topics of murder and death in popular music would provide, in popular music studies and beyond. This analysis must know be taken further to other artists and genres in order to help produce help improve insight into the human condition, and use the analysis of these cultural objects for scholarship in fields such as law, criminology and psychology.

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